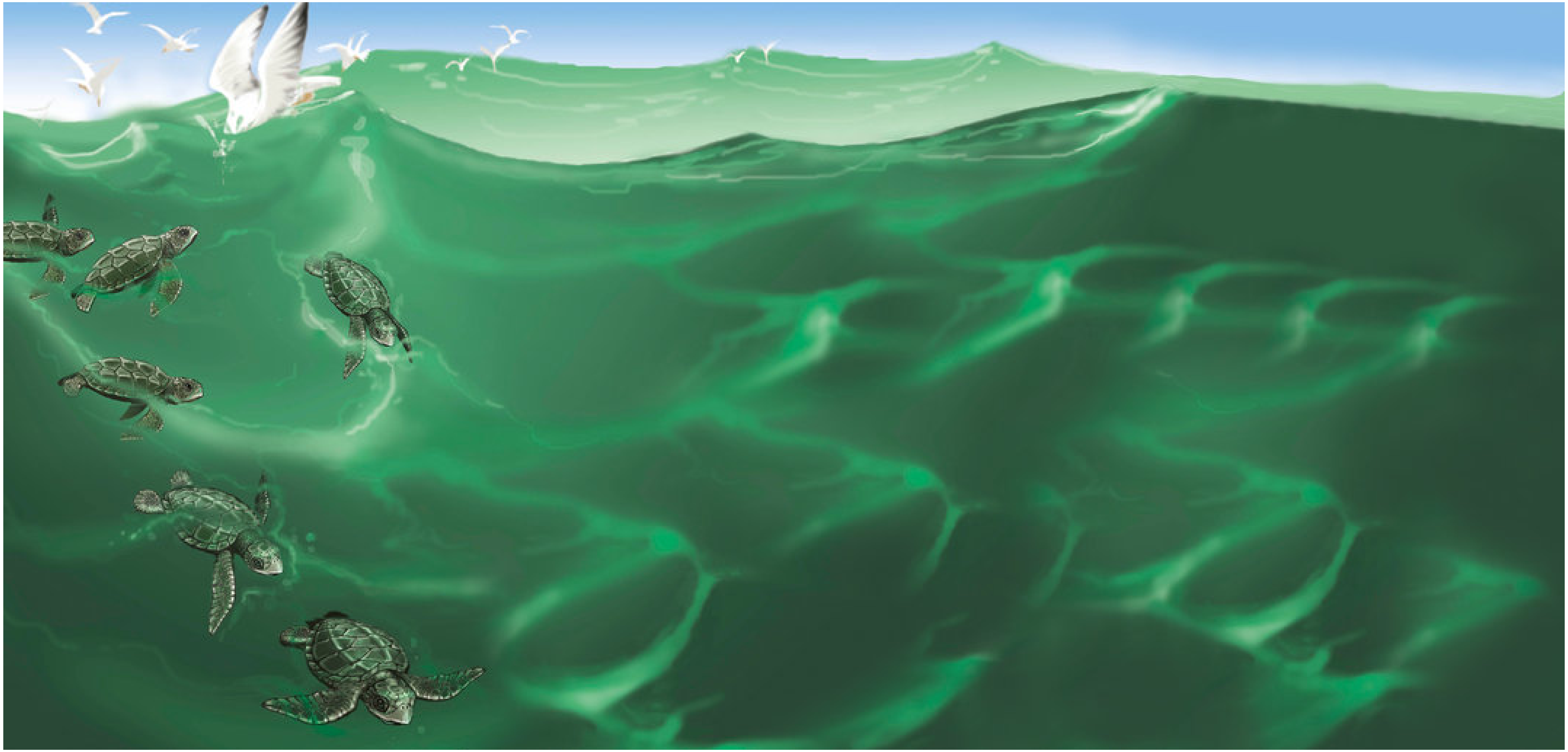


PRATHAM BOOKS
A Book in Every Child's Hand

Level 4

Turtle Story

Author: Kartik Shanker
Illustrator: Maya Ramaswamy



When I woke up in the morning, the sun was shining again. I looked around me, wondering where I was. And then I remembered. I was a baby sea turtle - an olive ridley - in the middle of a big blue world, which I had heard someone call the ocean. There was blue and green water in every direction, and the sunlight was playing games with the clouds. I tucked my flippers beneath my body and floated for a while, letting the current carry me.

I did not know where I was. But that does not matter when the sun is shining, and your stomach is full.

The sun warmed me, and filled me with new energy.

Just as I was beginning to think that I would love to spend the rest of my life here, a school of fish went by. Chasing them was a really big fish. I could tell he was a really hungry fish too. When he saw me, his eyes lit up. “Mmmmm,” he seemed to be thinking, “baby turtle soup!”

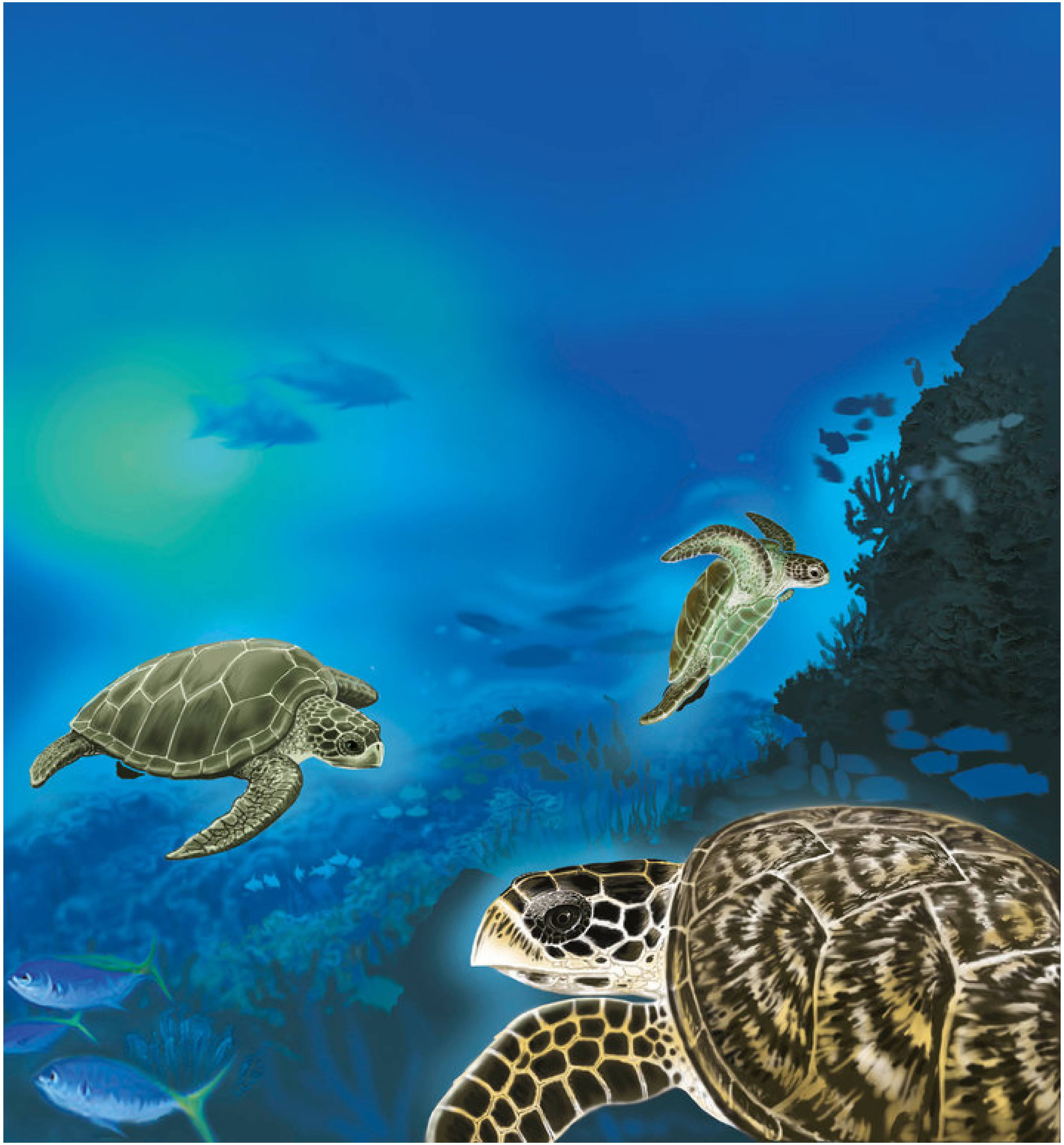
Moments later, I was swimming as fast as I could, with those big teeth snapping at my little hind flippers.

Just when I was beginning to tire, I saw a seaweed raft. A seaweed raft is just that, a floating mass of seaweed and driftwood that travels around the ocean, carried along by the current. On and in the raft are the Drifters, all the sea’s little and not-so-little creatures that float around the ocean, waiting for something to happen. Gratefully, I slipped into the raft. I would not leave this safe haven for many, many years.

Being on the raft was like going on a world cruise. I enjoyed it very much, but as I grew up, I decided it was time to explore the big wide world outside the raft.



I had heard wonderful things about a place called the Reef where
a lot of other turtles lived. Everyone said the Reef was the fairyland
of the ocean. They said it was full of beautiful,
brightly-coloured creatures, both harmless ones like the clown fish
and poisonous ones like the scorpion fish.
I wondered how I would find it.



All of a sudden, it became very dark. A huge shadow covered me. Frightened, I looked up, only to see the biggest turtle I had ever seen. His back was soft and leathery. I stared. A turtle with a soft back? All the ones I know have very hard backs.

The big turtle caught me staring. “Surprised?” he grunted pleasantly. “You shouldn’t be. I’m a leatherback turtle.”



“Good name, Sir,” I mumbled.

“Where are you going, Sir?” I continued. “To the Reef to live with the other turtles?”

“Ah,” sighed the leatherback. “I wish I had that luxury. But no, I am too busy searching for jellyfish. They are all I eat.”

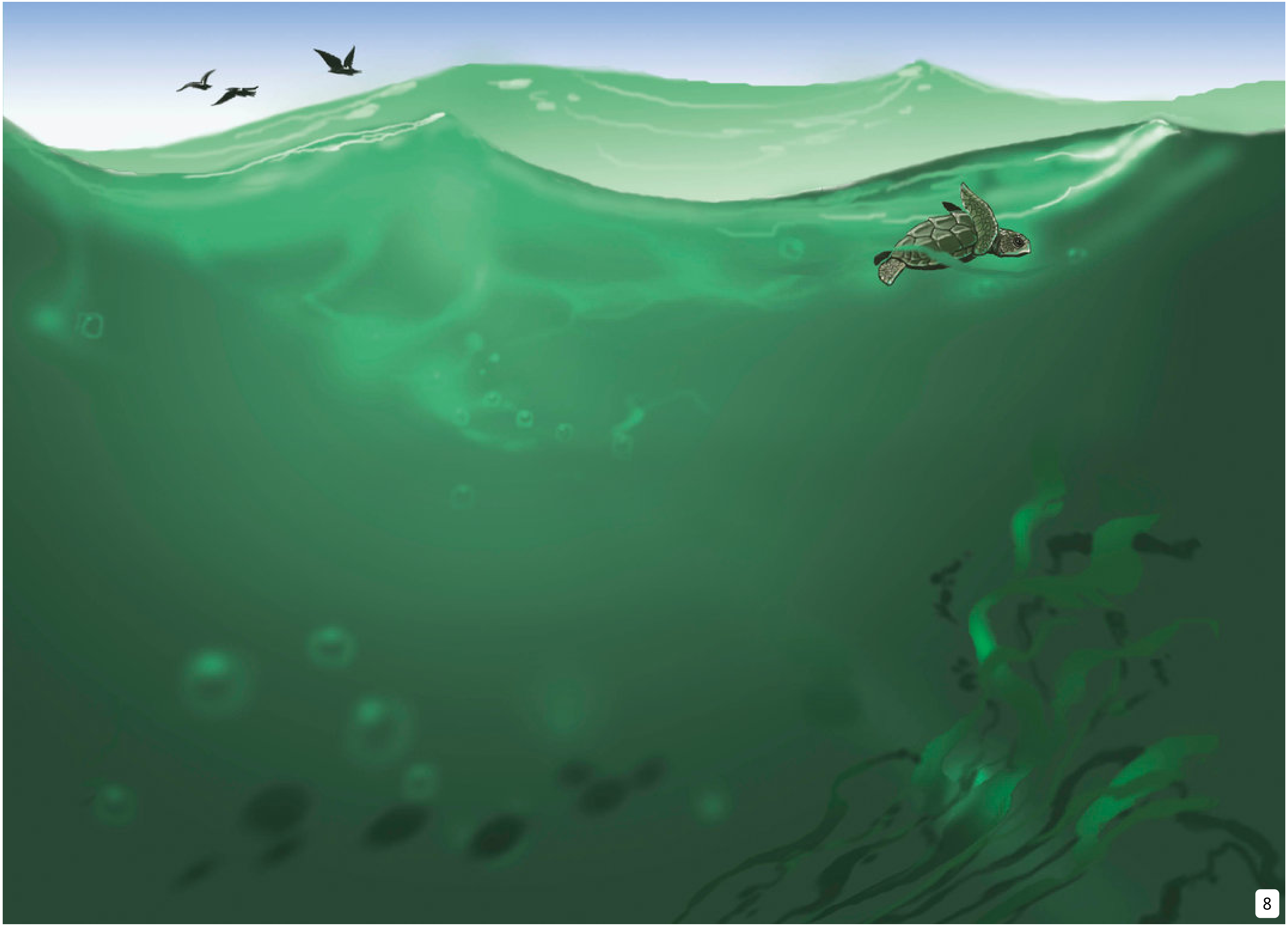
“Where do you find them?” I asked.

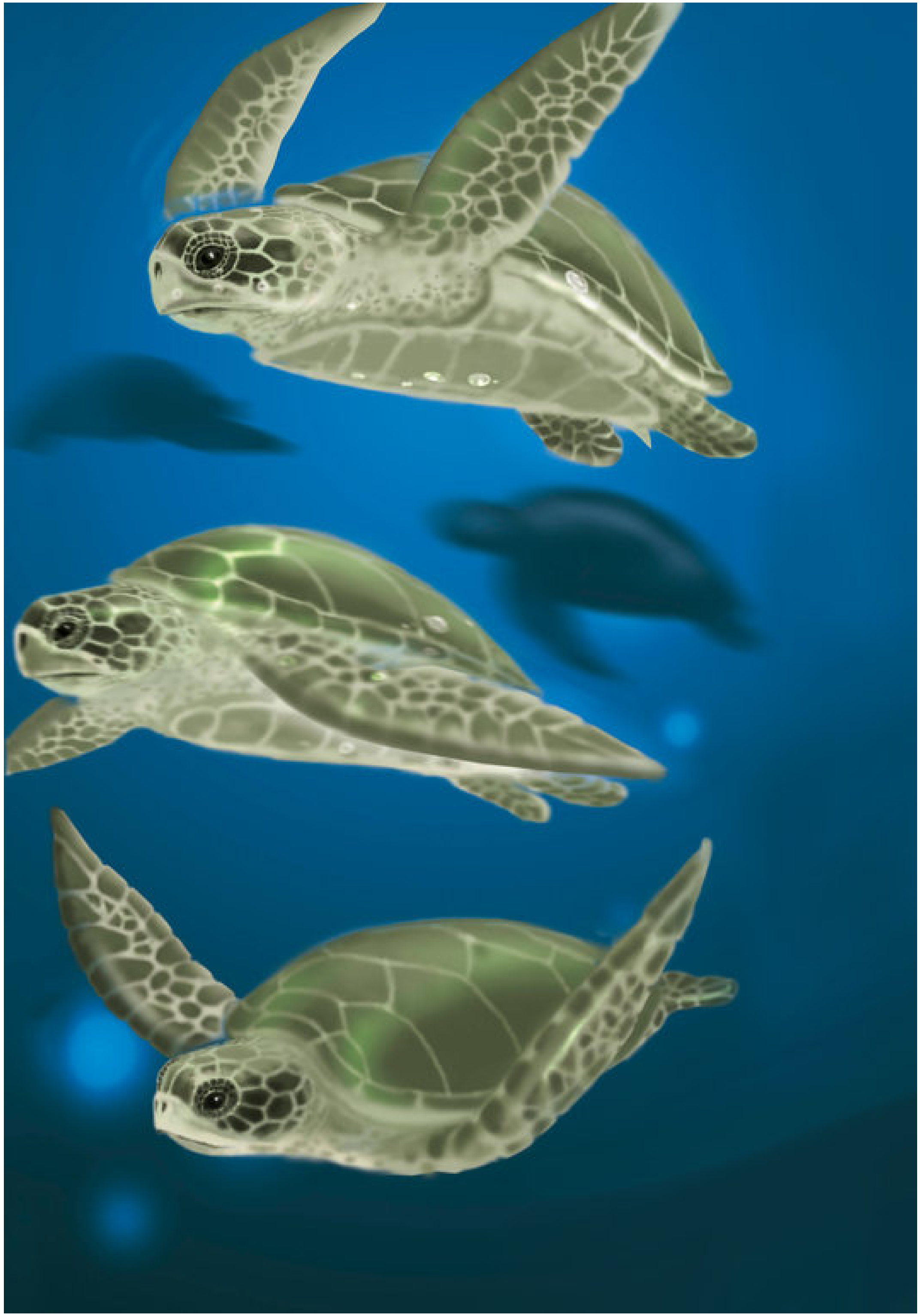


“Out in the deep, deep, sea,” said the leatherback. “Sometimes I have to dive more than a 1000 feet to reach them. And sometimes I go all the way to Canada, where the water gets very cold. No other reptile could survive in such cold waters.”

“If it isn’t too rude, Sir,” I said quietly, “can I ask how much you weigh?”

“Nearly 600 kilograms, little one,” replied the leatherback, looking amused. “And I’m proud of all of it, including the fat. For it’s the fat that helps me get through the long migrations. Well, I have to be off now...”





“Of course, Sir,” I said. “But before you go, could you tell me where I might find the Reef?”

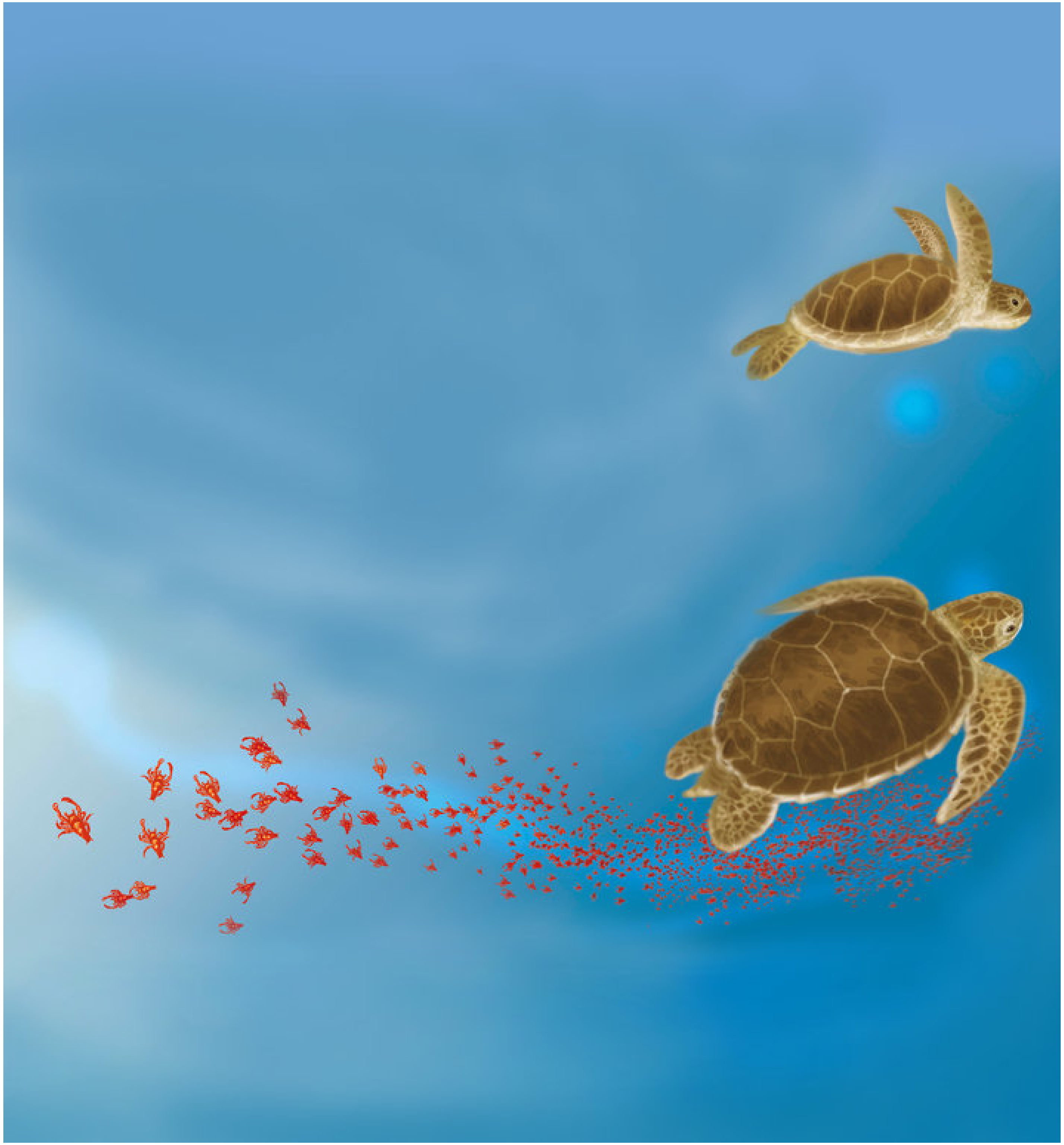
“That way,” said the leatherback, pointing with a flipper as he swam off.

“Thank you, Sir, and happy hunting!” I called out as I swam towards the reef.



It was on the Reef that I met old Green Turtle. My friend Hawksbill, whose mouth is curved like a hawk’s beak, told me old Green was nearly 50 years old. “My! That’s old!” I said. “How come she looks so young?”

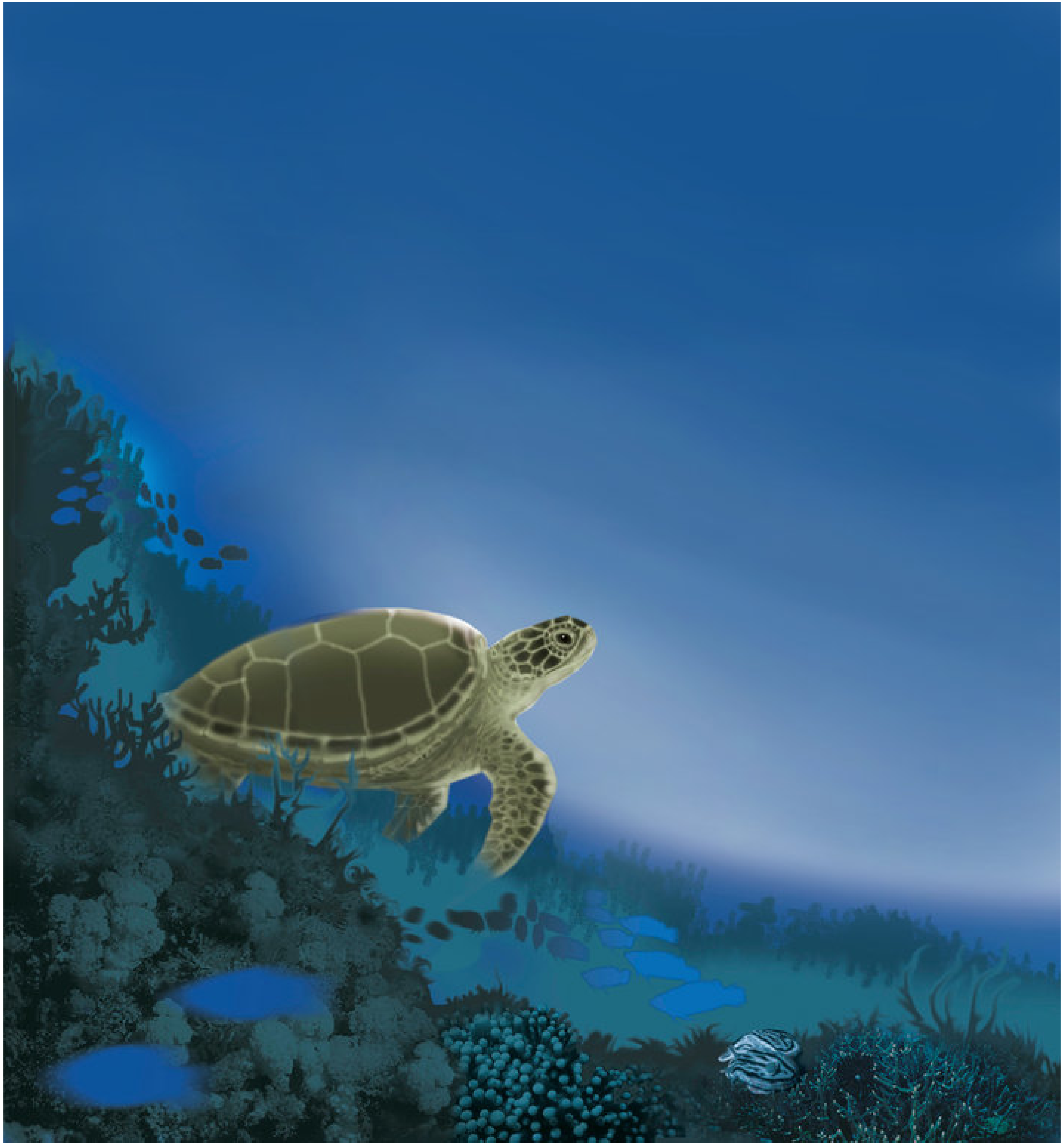
“Well,” said Hawksbill, “Green Turtle eats only sea grass and algae, so it took her nearly 30 years to become an adult. You and I will be adults by the time we are ten.”



“Do you know,” he continued, “that when she wants to nest, she migrates to islands in the middle of the ocean? Clear blue lagoons, white sand, they’re beautiful…”

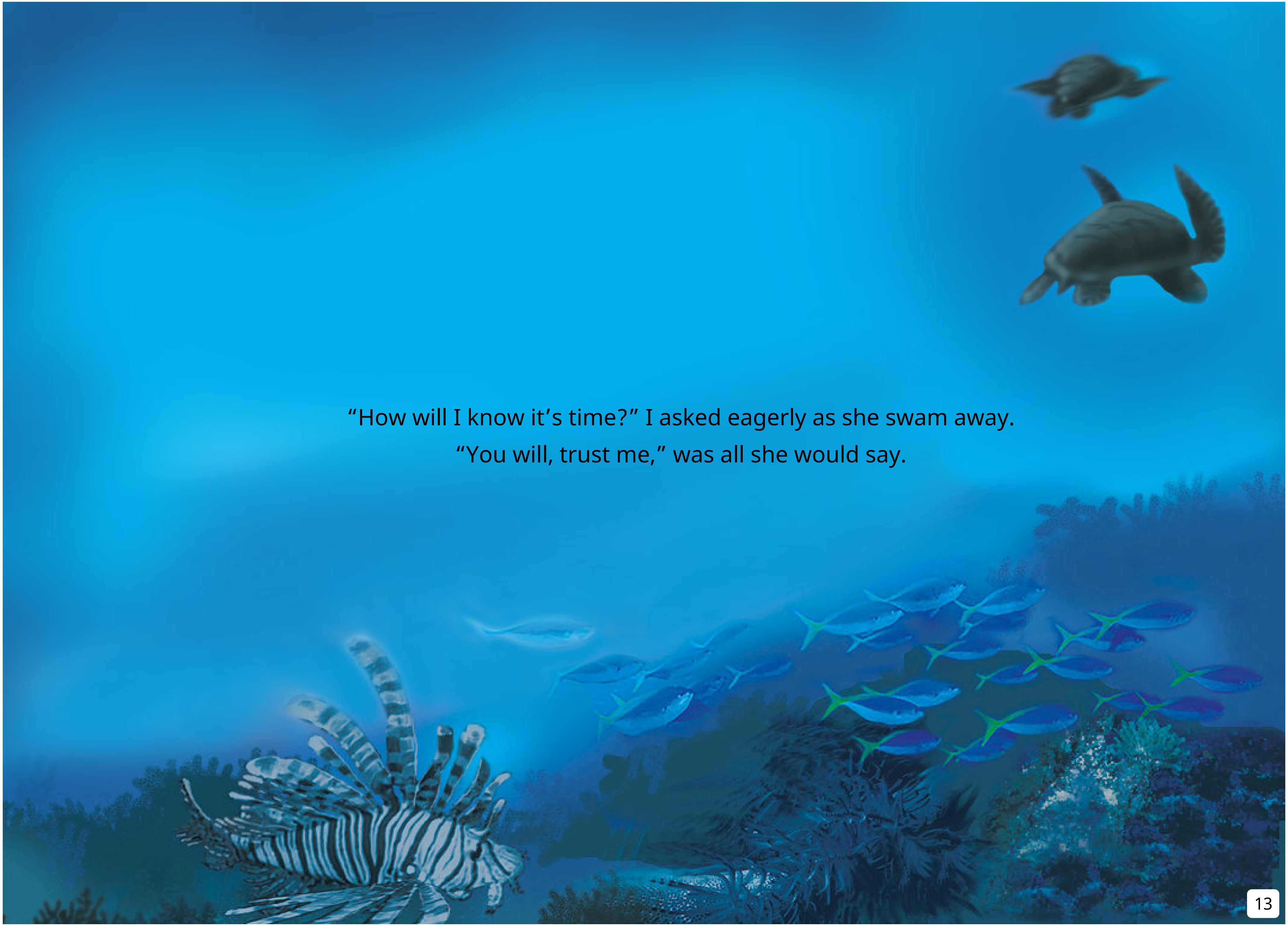
“Have you been there?” I asked.

“Oh yes, sometimes you have to crawl over the coral to get to the beach,” said Hawksbill.



I shuddered. I would hate to crawl over sharp coral. Soft sand is what I like under my soft belly.

“You won’t have to do it, don’t worry,” another ridley told me. “We only nest on soft beaches, like the ones on the coasts of Mexico, Costa Rica, and India. But you’ll see for yourself, when it’s time…”



"How will I know it's time?" I asked eagerly as she swam away.
"You will, trust me," was all she would say.



I spent some happy years on the Reef, meeting many of my turtle cousins. Apart from green turtles and hawksbills, I met loggerhead turtles - the ones with the really big heads - and plenty of other ridleys like me.

And then one day, just like that, I was all grown up, and it was time to go. How did I know it was time? I don’t know. Something deep inside me told me so. I knew I had to swim north with all the other ridleys, all along the eastern coast of India until we reached Orissa, and lay my eggs on the soft beaches there. The little compass in my head would tell me how to get there.

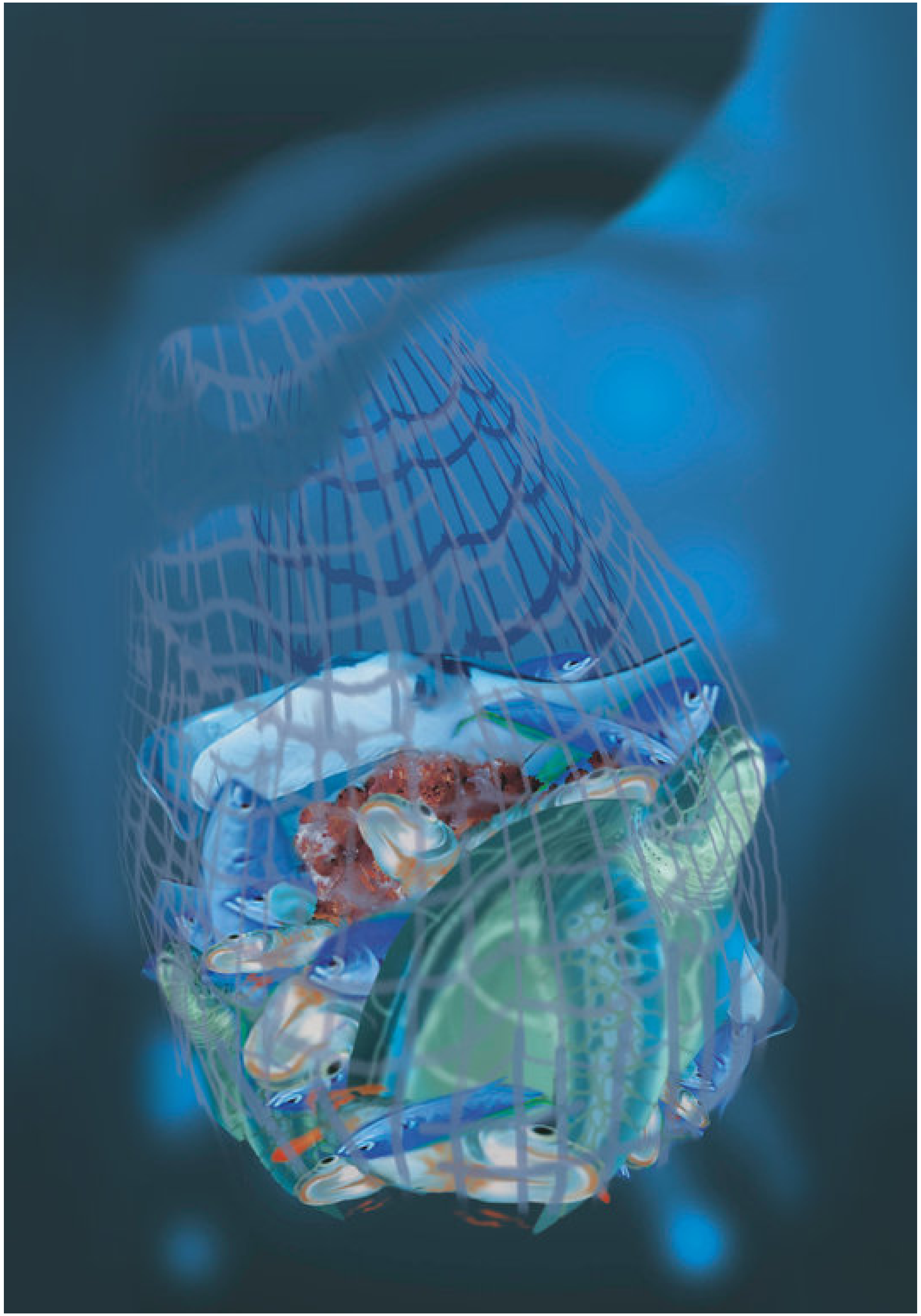


“It’s only about 2000 kilometers,” sniffed a loggerhead as he swam off in a different direction. Show off! Just because loggerheads like him sometimes swim almost 15000 kilometres to lay their eggs (from California, all the way across the Pacific Ocean to Japan)! I ignored him, and continued gorging on flying fish, my favourite food.

The big journey began.
The water around me was full of other ridleys like me,
swimming powerfully.



It wasn’t an easy journey. Along the way, there were many dangers. Though I was now bigger than most of the fish, there were still sharks that could catch us.

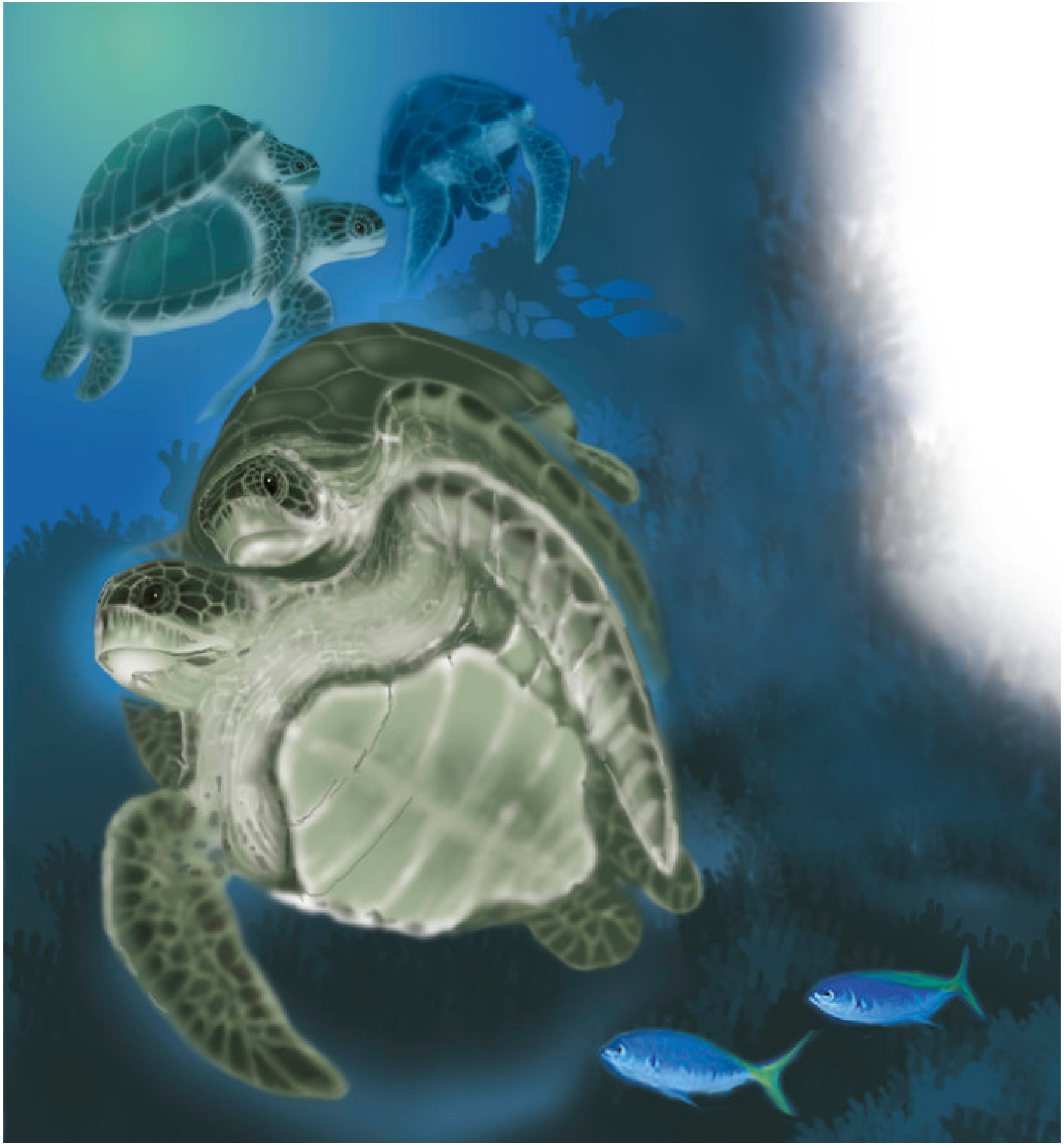


But the sharks were not as dangerous as the many fishing nets that we had to swim past.

I swam as carefully as I could, avoiding all the nets, especially the terrible trawl nets. I managed to escape them all, but some of my friends weren’t so lucky.

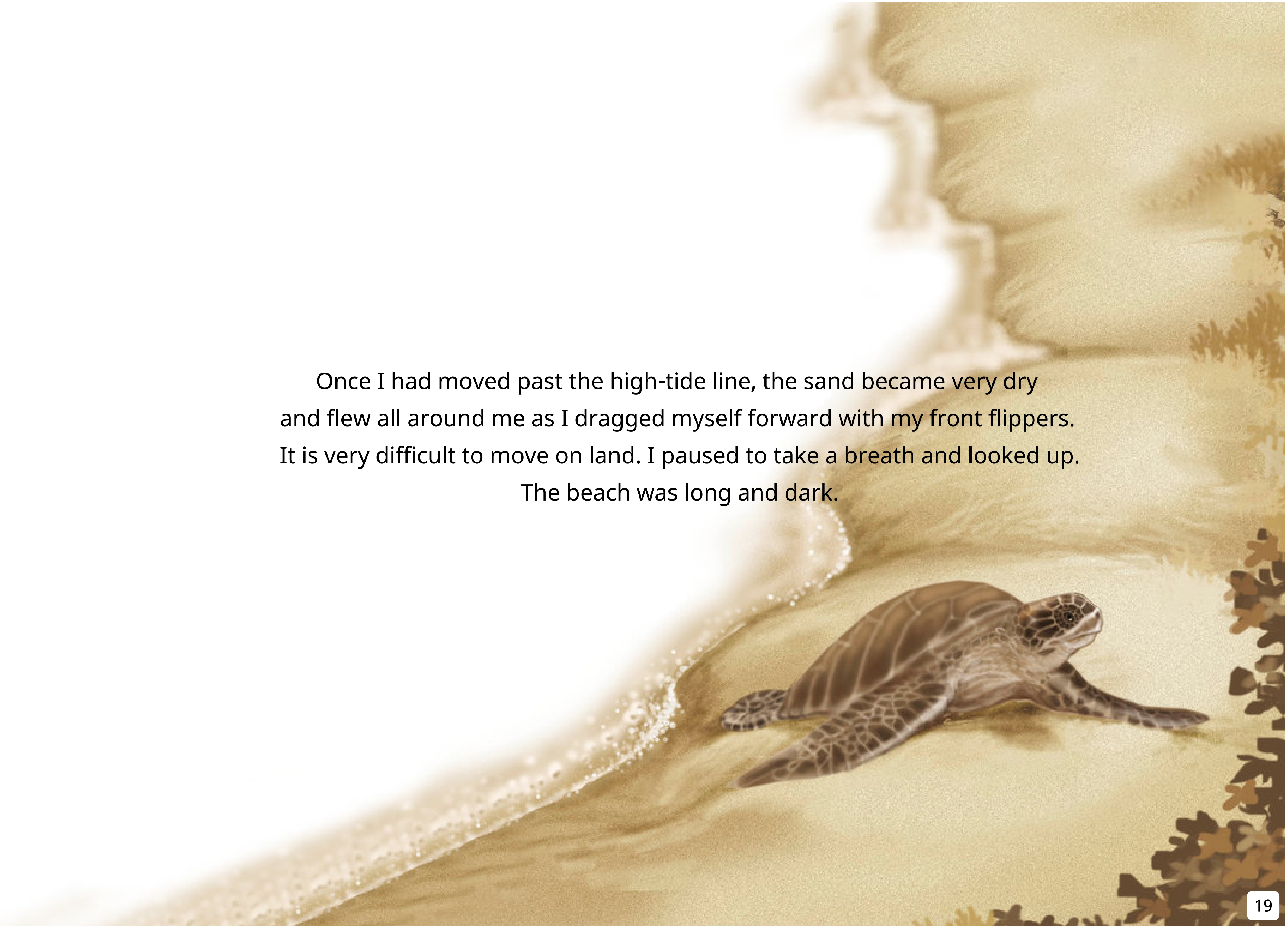
Finally, I reached the beach of Gahirmatha, the place where more ridleys nested than anywhere else in the Indian Ocean.

It was time to lay my first nest.



We always nest at night. I waited until the tide was a little high, so that I wouldn’t have that far to crawl on the beach. I came in with the surf, and felt land under me for the first time since my birth.

It felt very strange at first. Slowly, I dragged myself up the beach to find a dry spot.

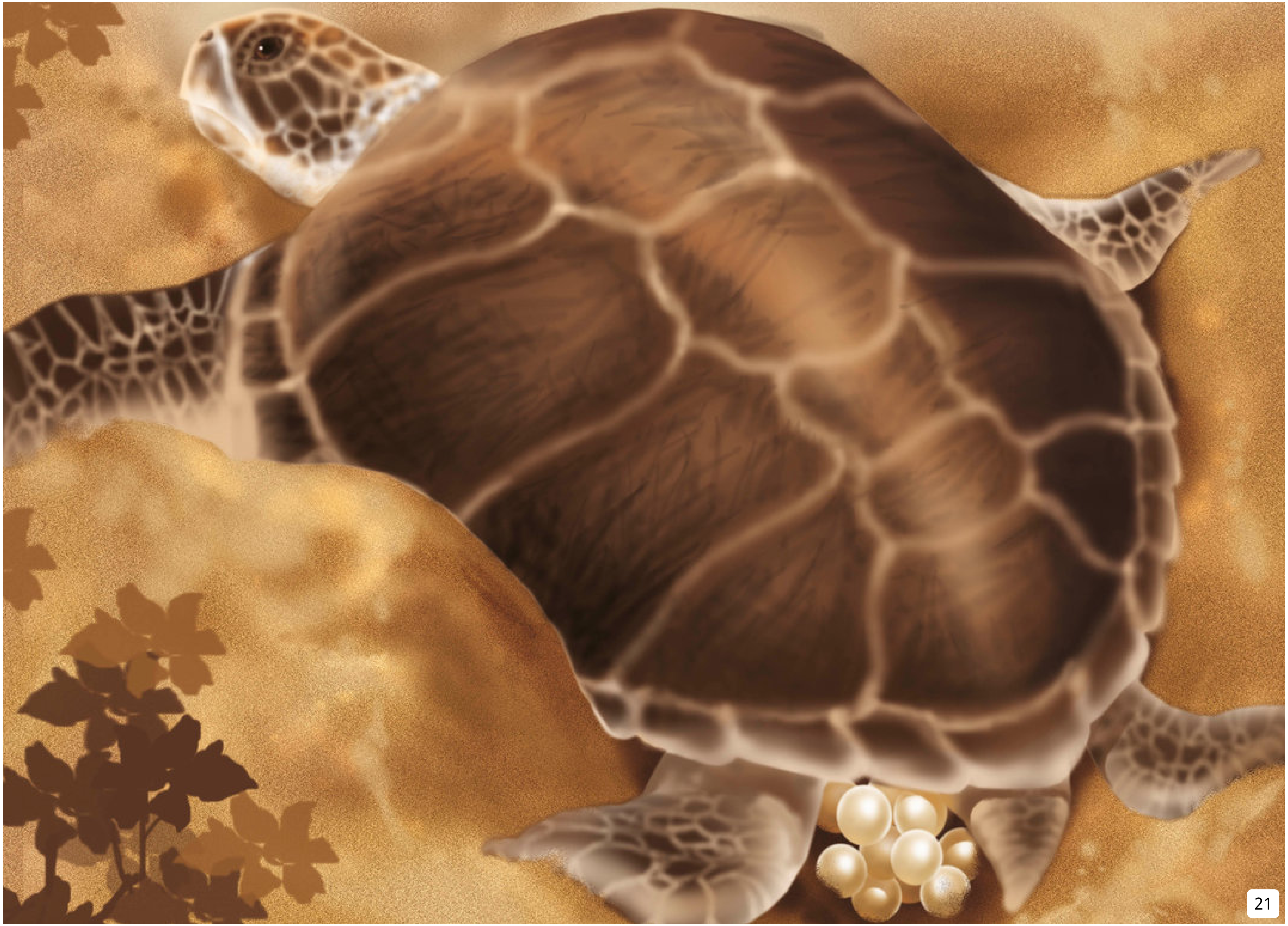


Once I had moved past the high-tide line, the sand became very dry
and flew all around me as I dragged myself forward with my front flippers.
It is very difficult to move on land. I paused to take a breath and looked up.
The beach was long and dark.

Behind the beach was a huge dune and some bushes. I had heard there was a large forest behind this beach called Bhitarkanika which was full of saltwater crocodiles, king cobras and all kinds of other animals.

Then, suddenly, I saw another animal on the beach. It had four legs and it was digging up a turtle nest. I went back into the water as fast as I could. Later that night, I crawled up again, and went up the beach into the Ipomea creepers.

At my chosen spot on the beach, I cleared away the dry sand, and made a big pit with my hind flippers. I am very fussy about how exactly I do this. I always put one flipper in after the other, scoop up some sand and throw it out.





About two feet deep and shaped like a flask, with a narrow neck leading into a deep cavity, it was a beauty. I then began laying my eggs.

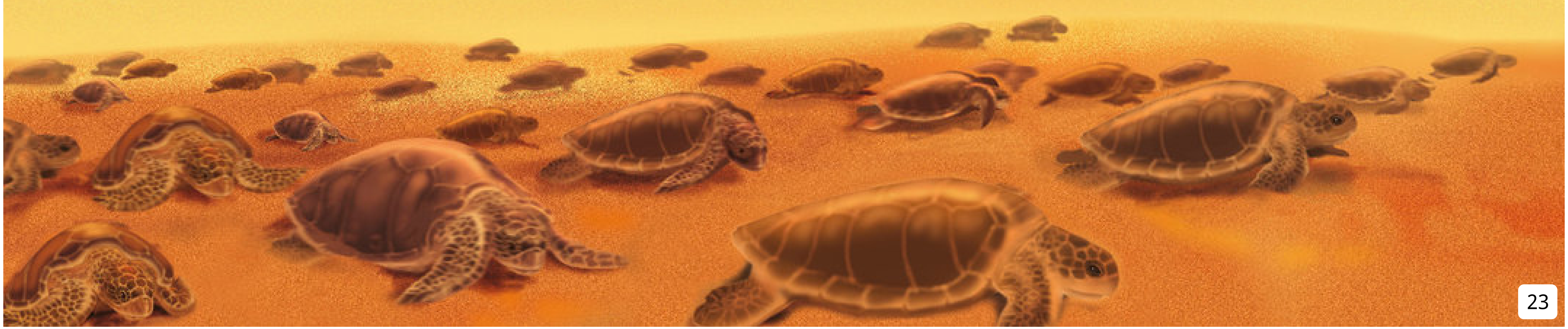
1, 2, 3,..., 44, 45,..., 99, 100 and then I was done.

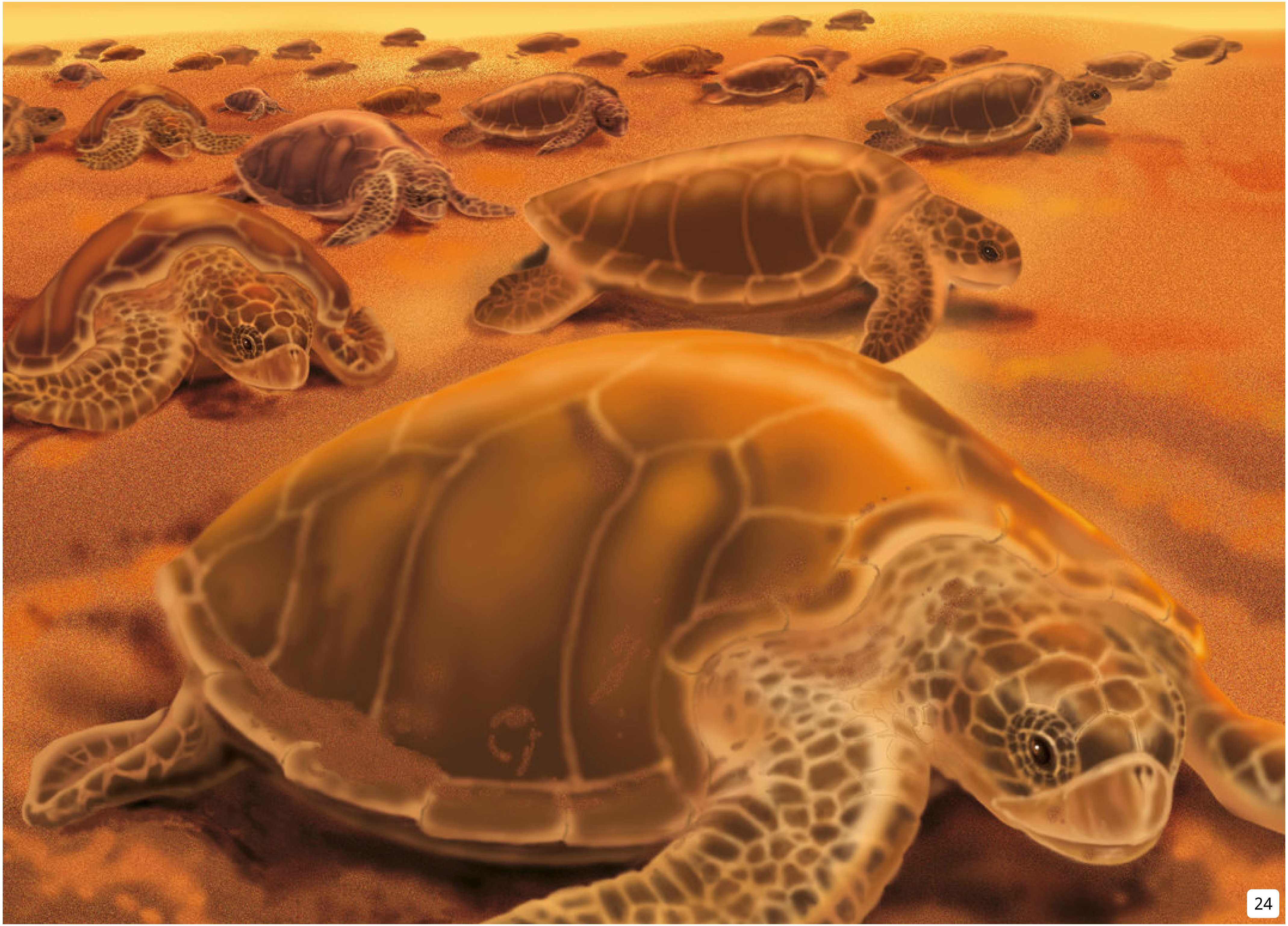
I covered my precious eggs carefully with sand, and thumped it down with my body. Finally I threw some sand around to make sure that no one would find my nest.

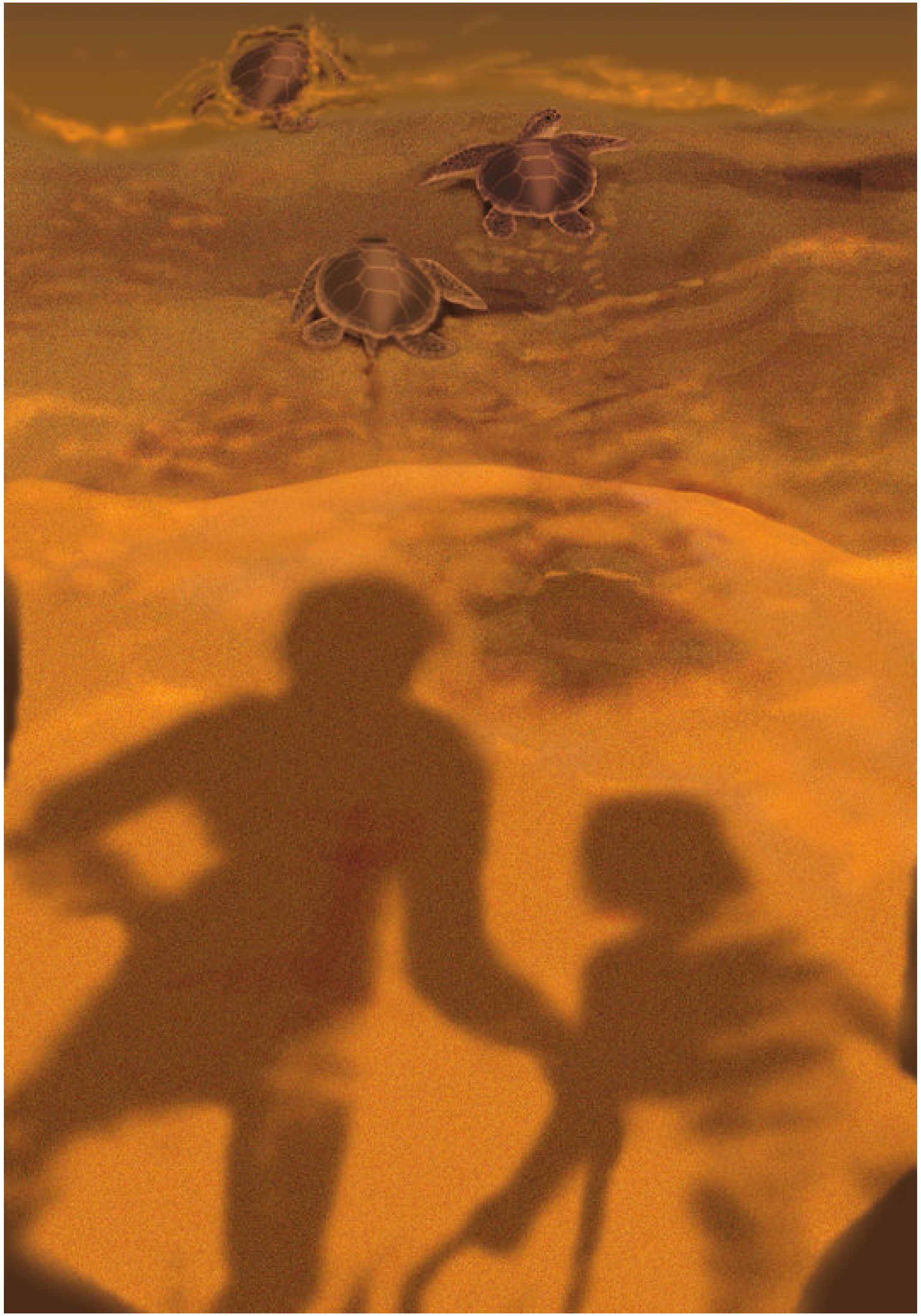
Quickly, quickly, I crawled back into the sea where I felt much safer.

Two weeks later, I was getting ready to nest again. We usually make enough eggs to lay two or three nests during a season. My common sense told me that it would be a good idea to nest again where I had the previous time. It seemed like a good, safe place.

That night, as I was waiting in the shallow water for the tide to be right, I noticed a slight change in the wind. It was stronger and blowing from a different direction. Suddenly I realised that there were hundreds, no, thousands, of other turtles all waiting to nest. I knew a lot of other ridleys were also swimming around in the Gahirmatha waters waiting to nest, but I had never seen so many together.







And then, we were all rushing up the beach together. The beach was already full. There were thousands of other ridleys, sand was flying in the air, we were all bumping into each other.

Finally, I managed to find a clear spot, and dig a nest for myself. The turtle next to me was in such a hurry, she started to lay her eggs even before she could finish digging her nest.

I was shocked, we turtles never do that.



“It’s an arribada*, lady,” she said, “we all get a little crazy during this time.”

Nobody really knows why we do this. But it works for us, because millions of hatchlings hatch at the same time. That way, most of the little ones escape being caught by birds, crabs and jackals. These days, of course, we have humans to worry about as well.

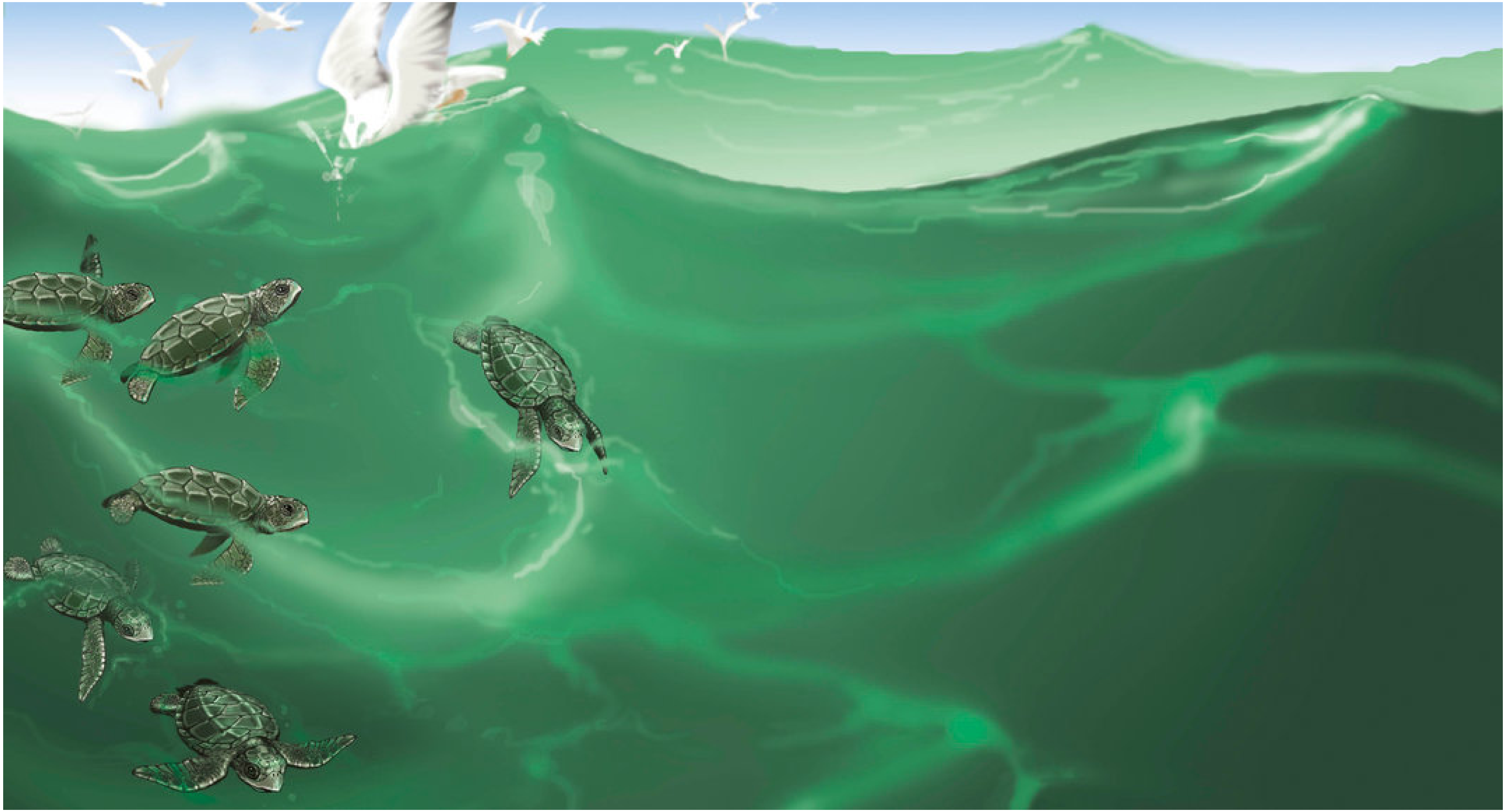
** During an arribada - which means ‘arrival’ in Spanish - thousands of olive ridleys come ashore in a frenzy to nest. Scientists still aren’t sure why they do this.*

Finally, it is time to leave and return to my feeding ground. I will spend a year or two there, eating and building up the energy for another visit to Gahirmatha. Green Turtle, on the other hand, sometimes needs to eat for five or six years before she has the energy to make her next journey to nest.

As I leave, I think of the little ones I have left behind. For 50 to 60 days, the eggs will remain under the sand, warmed by the sun. And then one day, they will hatch, breaking open their shells with the tips of their snouts. They will huddle together, over a hundred hatchlings under the sand, waiting for the sun to set and the sand to cool.

Then, in the darkness, when it is safe, they will come out, all at once. They will see the moonlight bouncing off the sea, and know which way to go. Hopefully they will be no streetlights to make them go in the wrong direction.





They will swim against the waves and dive under the oncoming breakers.



Oh, there will be big fish and small fish out to get them, and seagulls and eagles, but some will get away. Out into the open sea where they will find their own little seaweed rafts, their floating homes for many years.

Then they will grow up, and perhaps they will come to my feeding ground. Perhaps we will meet, though of course I will not know them.

Still, I am happy knowing that they are out there somewhere, and that someday they will return like me to this very beach to lay their own eggs, and start the whole wonderful circle of life all over again.

A MESSAGE FROM THE OLIVE RIDLEY TO YOU

Sea turtles are in danger worldwide, for many reasons. Some species of turtles are killed for their meat, which is used to make turtle soup. The shell of the hawksbill turtle is used to make tortoiseshell products like eyeglass frames and hair accessories. Many turtle eggs and hatchlings are eaten by predators like dogs and crows. But the biggest danger comes from fishing. Many sea turtles get accidentally caught in a variety of fishing nets, drown, and die.

In India, there are many conservation groups that are trying to save sea turtles. Each coastal state has one or more such groups.



What can YOU do to protect sea turtles?

If you live near a beach where turtles come to nest:

• Help keep the beach clean so that baby and mother turtles do not get hurt.

• Educate the adults in your locality about how streetlights and other lights near the beach can be harmful to turtle hatchlings – once they hatch, hatchlings figure out where the sea is by looking for the reflection of moonlight on water, so if there are other bright lights in the area, they can get confused and wander off in the wrong direction, and into danger.

• Find out if your state has a local sea turtle conservation group and see if you can join them.

If you don't live near a beach:

Read more and more about sea turtles and talk to everyone you know about the dangers they are facing. Spreading awareness is a BIG part of conservation.

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Turtle Story
(English)

Under cover of darkness, baby olive ridley turtles hatch from sun-warmed eggs on remote beaches. One of them, the little hatchling who is the narrator of our story, is delighted to make it across the beach and into the ocean without losing her way or being captured by predators. But can our little olive ridley survive the dangers of the ocean? Will she make it past the deadly sharks and the terrible fishing nets and reach adulthood? Will she ever have the pleasure of laying her own brood of eggs? Find out in this charming life story of an olive ridley turtle, and meet several other interesting creatures along the way.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.

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